Payoff
The movement to self-directed work teams involves several myths that impede successful implementation of the team structure. IS managers who learn to recognize these myths and manage their related miseries take important first steps toward team outcomes that increase organizational effectiveness and help ensure market recognition. Follow-up in the form of management strategies for realizing the true magic of the team structure is provided in article 1-03-76, “Self-Directed Teams: Transformation Strategies and Outcomes.”

Problems Addressed
In the information age, manufactured products have become commodities. Global expansion in particular has allowed companies to clone products faster and at less cost with more regularity than ever before. Because the need for product differentiation becomes increasingly important when products are commodities, organizations are competing to bring the most innovative product to market in the shortest possible time and with the strongest customer service.

The ability of organizations to adapt to these marketplace changes is closely tied to the search for infrastructures that strengthen the organization and maximize its human potential. One such structure is the self-directed work team.

The process of developing high-performance Self-directed Team profoundly influences an organization's membership, management, and the organization itself. Innovation, creativity, collaboration, ownership, and employee satisfaction or even passion about work are some of the positive outcomes of the team-based organization that increase effectiveness and efficiency and help ensure market recognition and differentiation.

The movement to self-directed work teams and more interactive and innovative organizations is not an event or a program implemented through a basic and clear-cut plan. It is a profound and basic transformation in the way organizations relate, interact, and respond to each other and their customers. Although its path is unclear at times and the final possibilities uncertain, what is clear is that the transformation emphasizes relationships, processes, and learning. This article, and article 1-03-76, are designed to support IS managers who have recently made the decision to implement self-directed teams and those who have already achieved varying degrees of progress with the team structure. This article focuses on recognizing and managing the myths and the miseries associated with the organizational transformation to teams; article 1-03-76 provides management strategies for realizing the true magic of the team structure.

Establishing the Context For Teams
Significant learning must occur before an organization embarks on the transformation to teams. A framework and link (i.e., context) need to be established between the current organizational state and the reason for having the conversation about the desired state. The context thus provides the basis for the conversations that are necessary for building a strong foundation for change.
The important context regarding teams concerns definitions of terms that are frequently interchanged in organizations. Clarifying the following definitions is the first step toward group unity:

- **Groups.** Two or more people who work together toward a common goal, individually, with little interdependency.

- **Self-directed or self-managed teams.** Groups that have learned over time to take on higher levels of responsibility for their work with higher incidence of interdependency.

Each of these definitions contains degrees of variation across a spectrum ranging from limited intrateam interaction and dependency to highly integrated, highly dependent interaction among team members. This concept is illustrated in the graph in Exhibit 1, which depicts the type of team opportunities existing in an organization based on the duration a group is to work together to meet an objective and interdependency of the work being performed.

### The Spectrum of Opportunity

The graph does not provide a linear or absolute view. It is intended to generate thoughts and guide related dialogues about teams and to help develop a spectrum of opportunity that more closely resembles a particular organization. There is no right or wrong place to be on the graph, no better or worse arrangement of groupings. The important point is for an organization to have the conversation about the range of possibilities and how teams could fit into the organizational structure. Even in the lowest quadrant of opportunity, an organization can achieve benefits of the team structure by polishing relationships and communication skills.

### Myths of Self-Directed Teams

Myths are described as fiction, parables, stories, tradition, and, most appropriately, legends. According to the *American College Dictionary*, legends are “nonhistorical or unverifiable stories handed down by tradition from earlier times and popularly accepted as historical [factual].” In other words, the legend is considered fact until disproved.

This same definition is at work in organizations. Organizational myths or legends are the truth for the people in the organization, who make decisions based on a combination of these myths and facts. Because myths lead to additional myths and subsequently to miseries, IS managers should recognize and prepare for them. Five myths appear most frequently in organizations implementing the team structure.

#### Myth One: Managers Know How to Do This

The first myth regarding teams is that managers know how to implement and build teams; they have all the right answers, the most profound vision, the best competencies, and the grandest insight into the workings of the institution or organization. For the most part, the people of the organization expect the managers to make the right decisions, delegate effectively, and know what they are doing. The managers, in turn, also believe in this myth and its related expectations, which tend to reinforce the traditional hierarchy and one-way communication of information, knowledge, and experience.
Expecting that implementation of teams cannot be too difficult because it falls under the rubric of managerial experience, the managers begin to implement teams with the best form of leadership they know: to direct, delegate, and control. Once the teams begin their journey, however, the managers intellectualize that the role of the manager needs to change. This leads to the next myth.

**Myth Two: If Left Alone, Teams Will Naturally Develop**

Much of the literature on team-based organizations suggests that a manager's role needs to change. These articles go on to describe the manager's role at a macro level, as a coach with minimal involvement in the team's day-to-day operations. Managers usually interpret this material to mean: do not meddle or interfere in the natural group development of the teams; stay out of the team's way; take a distant position in relationship to the team; and focus more intensely on other challenges, like global, architectural, and strategic issues. All of these actions are intended to give the teams the space they need to develop into fully functioning Self-directed Team.

At the same time, managers still exhibit some of the tendencies associated with myth one; they become involved with great zeal when there is a problem, providing direction and leadership as in the past to save the day, but they retreat to their offices or conference room when the incident is over to handle their global tasks. In the initial phases of team development, this management at arm's length with associated spurts of crisis intervention is not the most effective method for implementing teams. A more effective approach to the relationship between managers and teams throughout the team process is depicted in Exhibit 2.

**The Transfer of Authority**

The first stages of team implementation require far more managerial involvement than managers realize. It is in the final stages that the transfer begins to take place and the team vision is realized. Organizations try to implement the vision--the final stages--without living through the natural growth steps. Several different methodologies explain the various stages that groups experience in their development. IS managers should familiarize themselves with the natural development expectations of this living entity called groups and recognize that management functions continue to be a part of the ongoing health of the team, even in the final growth stages. The third myth addresses the interesting related inference that managers will no longer be in the picture in the final stages of team development.

**Myth Three: Teams or Hierarchy--An Either/Or Choice**

Several questions and comments are frequently heard in organizations regarding the interaction between the hierarchical and the team-based organizations. These comments generally concern the respective roles of managers, team leaders, and team members.

**Role of Managers.**

Two questions are generally asked about the role of managers:
What are the managers going to be doing now that the teams are doing all of their work?

Does the manager still conduct performance reviews?

These questions result from the popular inference that self-directed teams eliminate, flatten, squash, and render obsolete the organizational hierarchy. The expectation that there will be fewer managers and fewer layers of hierarchy is not always realized. Some companies look to the team-based structure to assist them in adapting to significant downturns in their industry sector. Other companies are making the structural change because it is the right thing to do to remain competitive and progressive.

In either situation, the traditional hierarchy remains a core structure for the foreseeable future for most corporations. American business systems, education systems, community systems, government systems, and family systems are all largely based on hierarchial structures. When the relationships between members of both the hierarchy and teams are flexible and adaptable, team-based organizations maximize both systems.

**Role of the Team Leader.**

The hierarchy dilemma raises the related quandary over the team leader. One organization, for example, changed the title of this function from team leader to team facilitator to team representative, even though the essence of the role did not change. The title “leader” implies that the balance of the group assumes the role of followers. Yet the followers ask why they should follow the leader when the leader does not conduct their performance review and has nothing to do with their merit rewards or other forms of recognition.

The title “team leader” and inferred role work against the good intentions and essence of the original function, which is the role of focus person, meeting moderator, synthesizer of group decisions or indecisions, and communicator of information between the team and the outside world of customers, management, other teams, and other organizations. This role can rotate throughout the team but should do so more frequently than quarterly. It is also important to allow the team to decide the process for the group leader or representative as well as the clarification of the role for this person.

The function of leadership needs to be accomplished by the team but not necessarily by a single individual or by the team representative. Sometimes the term self-directed in regard to the leader or team members carries more meaning and empowerment than is originally intended, which leads to the next myth.

**Myth Four: Self-Directed Means Autonomous**

The outcome of this myth can be surprising. For example, the members of one team in pursuit of fulfilling their newly acquired responsibilities decided they would no longer provide support to a business application that was a maintenance and support nightmare. The team informed its customer to upgrade, rewrite, or purchase other software to handle this business application. On hearing of the team’s action, the application’s manager quickly clarified the intent of team empowerment and reestablished customer relations.

To this team, the term self-directed was misinterpreted as meaning self-government or autonomy. As teams struggle at times with their roles and the depth and breadth of their responsibilities, such misinterpretation provides a ready source of discontent and an easy
answer to difficulty. This leads to another myth about the homogeneity of the team function and roles of its membership.

**Myth Five: Teams Are Most Successful in Homogeneous Work**

Many IS managers think that successful teams have more homogeneous work than teams within their own organizations. Despite the fact that there are obviously successful, high-performance nonhomogeneous teams, such as emergency room teams, this myth tends to provide a rationalization for nonhomogeneous groups that are struggling with their responsibilities. Holding onto this myth stifles group growth and contributes to frustration, disappointment, and lack of confidence.

Taken together, the five myths associated with self-directed teams cause teams and their members to feel a sense of frustration, low self-confidence, disappointment, and confusion. The following sections speak to the miseries that result either directly or indirectly from the myths associated with the change to self-directed teams and provide some tips on their management.

**Team Miseries and Misery Management**

Miseries are a natural part of change and movement from a place of relative comfort to somewhere unknown. As a well-known adage of unknown origin says, “Some people prefer the certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty.” Because miseries can keep people from moving from where they are to their desired target, they have to managed. Some miseries can even be avoided.

**Misery One: Teams Are for Every Organization**

Organizations looking for ways to increase efficiency and effectiveness risk the tendency to force fit the latest structural concept, like Self-directed Team, into their organizations. Definite dangers exist with this line of thinking. Teams are not for every situation in an organization, department, or function. It is possible to have one area that is suitable for team implementation and the balance of the organization more suitable for remaining in the traditional hierarchical structure. Trying to implement teams in an organization or function where they are unsuitable is like trying to pound a square peg into a round hole.

**Misery Management.**

Because organizations require a receptive culture for successful implementation of teams, the key to the management of this misery centers on assessment of the organization’s culture and its receptivity to the team concept. If an organization does not appear receptive, the champion of the team idea needs to spend time influencing and preparing the organization for the team structure.

The spectrum of opportunity depicted in Exhibit 1 provides a starting point for the assessment of organizational culture. A valuable exercise for IS managers would be to plot the groups or functions within an organization in the appropriate quadrants. An enlightening conversation is sure to ensue if managerial staff and a cross-section of employees are asked to do the same. The learning potential is great regardless of whether the groups surprisingly plot the organization the same or, better yet, plot the organization differently.
As Exhibit 3 illustrates, the works of Rensis Likert on organizational types are also helpful in assessing organizational receptivity to teams. The four quadrants also represent four different styles of decision-making that corporations or individuals assume to varying degrees during the course of their work. Even the most participative of leaders or organizations balances the use of the exploitative-authoritarian style and other styles at certain times. In the case of self-directed teams, for example, a vice-president who announces that an organization will move toward teams is working from the top left exploitative-authoritarian quadrant. The same person then moves into the participative quadrant to involve the other employees in the development and implementation of the directive.

Organizational Types

The first step IS managers should therefore take in assessing organizational readiness for the team structure is to consider and then compare the predominant management style of the larger organization in relation to their own personal style as well as to the style of the IS department or division. If the two styles widely differ, then the managers need to work on influencing the relationship between the two groups to gain organizational support for the transformation to self-directed teams. When the two groups share borders, there is less work to be done in preparing for the transformation.

Misery Two: Team Killers

Team killers are those actions or observations that despite the admirable intentions of managers immediately stop the progress of a team in its tracks or suppress the growth process. The following sections describe some of the ways in which team killers play out in an organization.

Codependent Behavior.

Imagine a team meeting at which the IS manager asks a question regarding potential solutions or innovative ways of handling an opportunity currently challenging the organization. The silence in the room is soon broken, but not by a member of the group. Instead, the manager begins to answer the question. Like most managers, this manager mainly wants to contribute, share knowledge, and discuss ideas with the members of the group. Managers, however, are only own part of this team killer. The group membership contributes to the problem by deferring to the manager and waiting for direction.

The process of team building requires patience on the part of managers, because organizational members may have been functioning for several years in a dependent relationship. It will take deliberate new methods and time to make the change to a truly open environment.

Lack of Management Support.

Managers who distance themselves from teams to allow for the natural growth of the group sever the informal, day-to-day conversations of the previous organizational relationship. Team members may infer that the manager does not care what the teams are doing or if they are successful. In addition, because the teams are more distant from what
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exploitive-Authoritarian</th>
<th>Benevolent-Authoritative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Dogmatic</td>
<td>• Parental approach to management.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Manipulative rewards</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Top-down communications</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Consultative</td>
<td>Participative</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Management listens to employees but reserves right to decide.</td>
<td>• Leadership based on influence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Some reliance on intrinsic rewards, most based on extrinsic (i.e., monetary) rewards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intrinsic rewards predominate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Two-way communication.</td>
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is happening in the organization, they end up feeling somewhat abandoned and isolated. IS managers must maintain informal avenues of communication as a source of information exchange and a demonstration of their interest and stake in the team development process.

**Say “Team” and Act Autocratic.**

“Your actions are so loud, I can't hear what you are saying.” Research has proven that people learn far more from what they see than from what they hear or read. Significant misery is experienced when an IS manager speaks about and even intellectualizes the movement of the IS organization to the team-based structure but does not follow through with appropriate actions.

Although it is certainly difficult for managers to move from previous autocratic tendencies and styles of management that have served them well in their careers to a more participative style, this pattern of behavior can damage the self-esteem of the team and lessen its energy for making decisions and continuing the effort toward successful implementation. Members of the IS organization begin to doubt the honesty and sincerity of the team-based structure as they find themselves in a situation that does not differ greatly from what they had known before teams were implemented.

**Misery Management.**

Although these managerial actions can stop team progress immediately, there is tremendous opportunity for learning in each of them. The IS manager's challenge is to remain open and somewhat vulnerable to learning while at the same time challenging the team to participate in a successful conversation on inferences and actions. One strategy is for the manager to schedule specific times, whether at the end of each team meeting or at another time, for free-flowing discussion of open-ended questions.

Because team members are also responsible for building the team relationship and moving closer to the vision, they need to learn to be more comfortable voicing respectful critique about specific situations. In addition, team members need to be willing to participate in the deliberate effort necessary for the successful implementation of the team-based organization.

As dialogues continue, the group may realize that there is a need for increased decision-making and problem-solving effectiveness. Remember, the managers and the teams do not know, intuitively, how to achieve this. It is the responsibility of the entire membership of the organization to push the edges of the envelope to experience its own empowerment. Managers are responsible for coaching and mentoring the team's increased empowerment and supporting its success.

**Misery Three: Misalignment of Support Structures**

Implementation of the team-based structure in an IS department or division may be the best structure for the function. However, if the balance of the organization is not making the move at this time or ever, potential misery is possible.

**Relationship to the Balance of the Organization.**

Teams are encouraged to work directly with internal customers and external suppliers to provide quality and innovative services. The internal customers and external suppliers, however, may be accustomed to working and establishing a relationship with
organizational management. This situation can cause great misery if not well supported by
the IS manager.

**Misery Management.**

IS managers are responsible for building and sustaining the position that teams are
the first line of assistance for all aspects of day-to-day operations and service provision.
This can be accomplished through discussions with customers and suppliers about the new
structure and its meaning for relationships and respective roles. The transition to smooth
team interaction with customers and suppliers is not effectively handled in a single
conversation, however, but rather through consistent and repetitive messages from
managers delivered both proactively and reactively. The effectiveness of the transition and
the minimization of this misery depends on the managers' ability to stand by the structure
change and the teams while maintaining strategic and long-term relationships with the
supplier and customer communities.

**Alignment of Rewards.**

Another important facet of misery three is misalignment of the reward structure
with the new team-based organization. Managers have professed the importance of
teamwork and that the team will be evaluated and rewarded based on both team
accomplishments and individual achievements. When managers do not follow through on
their commitment and rate people as individual performers without mention of the
performance of the team, the pain begins. The misery only intensifies if other managers are
awarding performance in very different ways. Misery management in this case begins with
the manager's ensuring that performance evaluations and various reward systems are
congruent with the team-based structure.

**Blending with Highly Individual Contributors.**

Every IS organization has its prima donnas--people who are extremely talented in
their particular area of technical expertise and know their value to the organization.
Generally, these individuals are pleasant while working with others but prefer to work with
other highly technical people or alone. They also like to move ahead without the formality
and baggage associated with work relationships and bureaucracy.

Because these individuals see little benefit from the team concept, they may escape the
team training and relationship-building sessions. Other members in the IS organization
may wonder why these highly technical people are treated differently. If the organization's
expectations of these individualists are not well managed, the perceived lack of fairness and
inequity may cause resentment.

**Misery Management.**

Organizational managers need to take a united position on the purpose of the team
structure and how various functions and individuals contribute to successful
implementation of the teams. Although placing highly technical people on teams may not
seem to make the best immediate use of their time or skills, IS managers who consider
future required competencies will see the benefit of improved relationship and
communication skills for all technical staff. Managers should assess and clearly
communicate the different development needs of individual contributors to team
development and the team structure.
Misery Four: Personal Fitness

In today's world, personal physical fitness and healthful lifestyles receive a great deal of attention. A career has an element of personal fitness too. In this context, personal fitness is the match of the gifts and contributions of an individual with the corporate culture's receptiveness and opportunity to maximize these gifts. There are times when the larger organization recognizes the gifts of an employee and seeks to develop this opportunity. More frequently, however, people in organizations become stuck in a situation, position, or occupation that is not a good match for them.

Lack of work fitness results in misery for both the person and the organization at some point. Waning or apathetic performance on the part of the employee affects productivity (i.e., organizational strength), especially as actions and contributions become more routine and less innovative over time. The organization is forced to bring in people capable of the higher levels of performance and competency. The original members of the organization are passed by for promotions and more challenging opportunities.

Misery Management.

Managing personal satisfaction and minimizing personal work miseries necessitates that an individual take charge of satisfaction. This can be accomplished in several ways.

Personal Preference.

It is important to for IS managers and professionals to understand their personal preferences for work and recognize the types of activities, events, or projects they gravitate toward or away from. In addition, some individuals feel more comfortable with one type of organizational environment than another. As employees of an organization that is moving from an autocratic environment to one of higher levels of participation, IS managers may need to assess their personal preferences in the work environment as well to ensure that there is a proper fit between the two. Knowing one's personal work and organizational preferences and using self-observation to confirm initial thoughts or ideas helps ensure personal fitness in the work environment.

Continuous Development.

The larger organization usually provides the initial training and education on the reasons for the change to a team-based structure, the context associated with the change, and the intended direction. This initial introduction and context is only the beginning or the foundation upon which to continuously learn and build competencies. The larger organization does not necessarily know what a manager's shortcomings are. It is the responsibility of IS managers to implement methods to identify the developmental needs of the IS organization and its teams and to promote a learning organization. Ongoing learning needs to be planned fully and deliberately.

Performance Tuning Through Reflection and Coaching.

IS managers should take the time to reflect on their style and competencies. At the same time, they need to remember myth one--managers know how to do this--as well as to learn from the experience of athletes, who continue to use coaches throughout their careers.
Few managers use the coaching technique, and even fewer women remotely consider its use. A coach serves to guide a person through self-reflection activities and other exercises that provide objective perspectives about current competencies and the desired state. Some people use a mentor for this purpose, but most mentor relationships are established to provide encouragement and advise and do not reach the level of a coaching relationship.

Recommended Course of Action

Recognizing the myths associated with Self-directed Team and managing their related miseries are important first steps along the road to successful self-directed teams. Awareness and acknowledgment that miseries are a natural part of the growing cycle of living structures—like organizations—provides some grounding for the normal feelings of discomfort and excitement associated with significant change and the transformations yet to come. Through deliberate, respectful, and thoughtful management, IS managers can minimize or eliminate some of the miseries that accompany the transformation to teams.

For a discussion of the broader management concerns regarding teams and the ultimate transforming power that is unleashed by successful self-directed teams, readers are referred to article 1-03-76.

Bibliography


Author Biographies

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- Team Members
- Managers